

CAPITOL PUNISHMENT

Our Man In Tahiti

By Art Buchwald

TAHITI—If I had my life to live all over again, I'd live it as the CIA man stationed in Tahiti. You get up in the morning and see if there are any ships in the lagoon. If there are, you write down their names on a piece of paper in code, stick it in an envelope addressed to an old lady in Salt Lake City (who forwards it on to Washington), and you have the rest of the day to snorkel, spear fish, water ski, sail and drink slow rum punches with lovely schoolteachers, airline stewardesses and French planters' daughters who were born during World War II.

I met one of these chaps at the bar on the Hotel Tahara, which is set in a mountain overlooking the lagoon of Papeete. I immediately knew he was a CIA man because at exactly nine o'clock he faced the sea and started striking his Zippo lighter on and off, despite the fact he had no cigarette in his mouth.

When the bartender confirmed he did this every night, I decided the man was either a CIA agent or had just given up smoking.

He was surprised I had seen through his cover so easily. "Most people think I work for the Encyclopaedia Britannica," he said.

"Whom are you trying to signal?" I asked him.

"Our man over there on the island of Moorea. We haven't heard from him in over a year. I'm beginning to suspect foul play."

"How could that be?" I asked him.

"Emile Debecque, that's his name, was a French planter who knew Moorea like a book. We needed a coast watcher who would station himself there and report to us on any Japanese ships trying to sneak into the lagoon."

"But why?" I said. "The war with Japan has been over for 25 years."

"Every Japanese ship going east that pulls into Papeete is carrying television sets, portable radios, cameras and automobiles. We can tell by the tonnage of the ships just how hard hit the American economy will be. We have to know before the ships reach Hawaii and San Francisco, so we can adjust our domestic production schedules. It is more important to know where the Japanese ships are now than it was during World War II.

"So we sent Debecque into the hills to watch for us. But we haven't heard from him, and I'm starting to think the worst. Every night I come up here and signal to him, hoping he will signal back."

As we were talking, a girl came in the bar with shampoo in her hair singing, "I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair." Two little native children followed her singing, "Dites moi, pour quoi."

"What's going on?" I asked Jack.

"That's Nelly Forebush. She was a Pan American stewardess who met Debecque one enchanted evening at the Bali Hai Hotel and fell in love. Nelly was from Little Rock, Ark. After she fell in love with Emile, she discovered he had two native children by a Tahitian wife. Nelly at first was horrified, as it was against everything she stood for. But finally she became so enraptured with the children that she quit her job with Pan American and promised Emile she would look after them until he came back."

"What an idea for a musical," I said. "But why the shampoo?"

"I didn't know Emile would be gone this long, and she went bonkers three months ago when the two kids drove her up the wall."